

### FAILURES OF IMAGINATION

“Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life? And why do you worry about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these. But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you--you of little faith? Therefore do not worry, saying, “What will we eat?” or “What will we drink?” or “What will we wear?” For it is the Gentiles who strive for all these things; and indeed your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. But strive first for the kingdom of God and God’s righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. ‘So do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries of its own. Today’s trouble is enough for today.’ **Matthew 6:25-34**

I worry. I am a worrier. In my family, worrying is a genetic trait. Both my parents frequently wake up far too early worried about one thing or another; and it’s a characteristic they were generous enough to pass down to me.

When I was in elementary school I was so worried about going to school that I would be sick to my stomach every morning. In high school my doctor taught me relaxation techniques. In college, she gave in and gave me pills to reduce the acid in my stomach and told me I’d give myself an ulcer if I didn’t relax. But there have always been so many things to be worried about. Big things and little things: world peace and if I have enough quarters to do my laundry; terrorism and my grades; cancer and the price of gas; friends on the edge and what’s for lunch. I hear this text and I have a hard time getting past the very first line: “Therefore, I tell you, do not worry.” It strikes me as yet another passage in scripture that urges the impossible and claims the implausible: don’t worry, God provides.

I’ve been really stuck in these passages lately - the ones full of implausible promises and impossible injunctions - the things we’re called to that just do not seem feasible.

In my last sermon I preached about Sarah, and I got stuck on the promise given to her - it seemed so unfair and so unlikely. Her laughter seemed like such a reasonable response to me.

Before that I was stuck with Israelites on the bank of the Red Sea. The waters have parted and they’re faced with a choice: go forward into what looks like uncertain death; through walls of water threatening to crash over them into the wilderness with few supplies and no map, trusting a God they barely know. Or turn back and surrender to an army and a Pharaoh they at least know they can survive. Their complaints to Moses strike me as reasonable.

I thought perhaps if I moved to the New Testament for this sermon, I could escape these difficult narratives. But I only found another level of craziness: seek and you shall find, knock and the door shall be opened to you, ask and you shall receive, don't worry, God knows what you need.

I don't even have to place myself in other people's shoes to know the absurdity of these injunctions and the faultiness of their promises. There are times when I've knocked until my knuckles were bloody and the door never opened. There are times when I've looked everywhere I could imagine for God and I never found Her. I've asked until my voice was hoarse and I didn't hear any answer. And I know that if I don't worry about my grades I could lose my financial aid; and if I don't worry about my relationships, I might say or do the wrong thing and that could wreck everything; and if I don't worry about war and hunger and the state of the world, I might not do enough to help make it better.

God might open the door and answer and show up; and God might provide - but not always and trusting these promises in this world seems to me a liability.

So I'm stuck. I can't imagine being Sarah and trying once more for children. I can't imagine walking through walls of water with the Israelites only to place myself in the wilderness with not enough supplies and no clear sense of where I'm going. I can't imagine the door being opened every time I knock, God being in front of me every time I seek, and always hearing at least some kind of answer. I can't imagine not worrying.

So my first response is to distance myself from these texts. I'm not *that* Sarah. I don't need to worry about children just yet. I'm not the Israelites. I'm not on the bank of the Red Sea and I have plenty of manna at my fingertips. When I knock and the door is not opened, when I ask and hear nothing, when I seek and can't find . . . well, I'm pretty skilled in using the excuses Hana mentioned: there is a reason - this was a text for then, today's world is different - these promises are metaphors and not *really* true anymore. And when it says don't worry, strive for the kingdom of God . . . well . . . I can worry and still strive for the kingdom of God, so I've found a loophole.

It works out really well, this distancing, until you make me preach. Preaching is becoming the bane of my existence. I can get through all my other classes, through the rest of my life, without having to *really* face the claims of the text. But you ask me to preach and I just can't avoid them. I can distance myself from the texts in my life, but I can't get up and preach distance because I don't really think it's a good thing. So I am slammed in the face with these texts - with the implausible promises and the injunctions to do the insane. I don't know how to trust the promises or how to live into them, but I remain convinced we're called to do just that.

So what do I do? What do I do with promises I don't trust and injunctions to do things I think are impossible? What do we do? Mostly I distance myself. But when slammed in the face, I consider trying. Trying to trust the promises, trying to live out of those promises. And I think when I fail, when I fail to try. I am suffering from a failure of imagination. I just can't imagine the promises being true. I can't imagine living out of them or that my doing so will make any difference.

I think we suffer, collectively and individually, from frequent failures of imagination. I'm thinking big things, like not being able to imagine an end to hunger, war or poverty in our lifetime - we so frequently say it will come some day, but mean not this day and not the next day and probably day in our lifetime, but it will come. And I'm also thinking about the smaller failures of imagination. How often do you find yourself in a situation you just can't imagine getting out of?

I think about last week, with its midterms and papers and everything else that had to be jammed into a week of no classes, and I know there were more moments than not when I just could not imagine the week being over and my work being done. This is a *complete* failure of imagination - of course the week will end, and I know myself well enough to know that the work would get done. But there were moments when I just couldn't imagine.

And if I fail at this little thing, this situation where I *know* the week will end, whether I can imagine it or not, is it any wonder that I fail at the bigger things? The situations where there are no concrete guarantees?

When I look to the world for evidence to support the promises, to bolster my imagination, I find little. I continue to see a broken world, full of pain and suffering. Full of people knocking, seeking, asking and hearing nothing. Full of people for whom God does not seem to have provided.

When I go to the text to look for evidence or help - it says 'consider the lilies of the field.' They're proof that God does provide, no matter how much we worry or don't worry.

The world gives me hunger, poverty and war, and in response the gospel hands me lilies. It is bordering on laughable. There is no comparison, the world is far more convincing and I think it is no wonder we suffer from failures of imagination. If we are to go on empirical evidence, on reason, the result is clear - there is little reason to trust in God's promises in *this* world.

Unfortunately faith never claimed to be about empirical evidence or reason. It is frustrating, it is hard to preach, it is difficult to live, but faith is about trusting the promises even when there is no evidence. Sarah had no reason to believe she might get pregnant, but she lived as if the promises were true and she kept trying for what seemed impossible. The Israelites had no reason to walk through water into wilderness, but they chose to trust a God they barely knew and they ventured forward. We have no reason to ask and expect an answer, to seek and know that we will find, to knock and trust the door will be opened; we have no reason to live without worrying. But faith is about making a choice and stretching our imagination.

It's not good enough to make the choice on paper, to have made it years ago, or to make it only with our words. We're called to live the choice of faith. I'm not sure what exactly that looks for you, but perhaps you can start here with me and hear this text once more:

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“Therefore I tell you - do not worry about your life. God knows what you need. Rather, strive for the kingdom of God.” Stretch your imagination and live as if the promises are true. And do not worry for God never suffers from a failure of imagination.

Thanks be to God!